Review of “Islamism and democracy in India: the transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami” by Irfan Ahmad

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BOOKS


MUCH has been said about the prospects for democracy in Iran, but what forms the basis for its realization? This book opens with a seemingly bold claim: ‘In many regards there is more progress toward democracy in Iran than in any other country in the Middle East, perhaps with the exception of Turkey.’ Maybe this surprised some at the time it was written, but in light of the events that have shaken Iran since the aftermath of the 2009 election, it is now as clear as the break of day.

Iran’s civil society, particularly its youth, has continued to question the legitimacy of the regime, turning instead toward a foundation for democracy and increased civil liberties. The green movement is only one manifestation in this broad and multifaceted struggle. The spirit of this resistance has by turns exploded in an exuberant display of defiance and been silenced by a regime desperate to retain power. Gheissari and Nasr presciently speak of this moment, this time when challenging the regime seems dangerous but destined to continue.

What inspires the belief that the struggle for governance will go on? The authors turn to history, particularly the history of political thought in Iran, for answers. Ali Gheissari, Adjunct Professor of History at the University of San Diego, and Vali Nasr, Professor of International Politics at Tufts University and a Senior Advisor in the Obama administration, bring considerable expertise to provide a concise yet comprehensive analysis of the defining moments in the nation’s history, all within the framework of the continual tension between state-building and democracy-building. As the book’s subtitle suggests, it can be read as a kind of brief history of the nation’s politics. It seems slim at just over 150 pages, but it is filled with sagacious and informative observations that remain accessible and valuable to scholars, students and in fact anyone interested in Iranian politics.

The authors begin with the period which saw the rise of the state: from the constitutional revolution of 1906 to the rise of Reza Shah and his eventual abdication in 1941. A very important feature of this period that the authors draw attention to is the creation of Iran’s first constitution, which was the culmination of a series of efforts to establish ‘accountable and representative government, one that would meet the demand for strong state institutions, rule of law, and individual rights.’ This, they say, was perhaps the first such movement in the Muslim world. As popular as the constitution was, it was nevertheless limited due to a lack of conditions required for sustainable democracy such as a middle class, a prosperous economy and political stability. Moreover, the conservative Ulama’s demands for the inclusion of Shia principles within the constitution led to a compromise that served to undermine democratic thinking by preventing the construction of a new foundation for politics. The authors show that though the constitution did manage to survive despite these and other difficulties, they also go on to say that with the authority of the Parliament seriously in jeopardy due to the growing interference of factions and foreign powers, centralization and state formation became the new imperatives.

This set the stage for Reza Khan, then leader of the Cossack Brigade, to become Reza Shah, the strong monarch who aimed primarily at modernization and the consolidation of central authority. Gheissari and Nasr interestingly point out that Reza Shah came to power thanks to the Ulama and the merchant class, and
not the Parliament; it is particularly notable that he then sided with the middle class to push for stability and progress, choosing to marginalize and silence nearly all other groups. This is helpful in understanding why positivist modernization took precedence over every concern voiced before the start of the revolution in 1906, including the potential for universalist subjectivity. The cry for freedom had been stifled by an impatient, patriarchal hand. Democracy would have to wait.

Chapter two moves forward through the sudden collapse of Reza Shah’s rule and a subsequent opening up of society which allowed for greater communication between the state and the citizens. This, the authors say, led to a democratic interlude, a period of serious political debate that would determine the future of democracy in Iran. The main political figure who receives most attention in this period is Mohammad Mosaddeq, whose National Front comprised of socialists, social democrats and liberal nationalist forces. Surprisingly, though the authors identify Mosaddeq as a spokesman for democracy, they claim that even as ‘he understood democracy as the rule of law enshrined in a parliamentary system,’ he did little to clarify the meaning and scope of democracy. This is perhaps overly critical, as Mosaddeq is considered by many to be a champion of constitutionalism, highly regarded for his nonviolent opposition to arbitrary rule and radicalism.

Regarding Mosaddeq’s overthrow, the authors make one other questionable assertion. They stress the disenchantment that many Iranians felt about Mosaddeq, emphasizing domestic dissatisfaction rather than foreign intervention. Others like Nikki Keddie, on the other hand, rightly attribute his overthrow largely to the involvement of British Intelligence and the CIA. The role of foreign interventions such as this has been crucial in shaping many Iranians’ distrust of foreign powers; as a psychological factor it should not be overlooked. Finally, as the chapter concludes with the rise and fall of Mohammad Reza Shah, the authors remind us that though Iran had developed, modernized and gained national unity, it failed in reconciling democracy and state-building. And as revolution swept over the nation, the prospects for the former once again grew dim.

Whereas in past decades Iran had been concerned with state-building, the period following the 1979 revolution could be characterized as ‘state-shattering’, the authors claim as they move on to the third chapter. Of course, those familiar with the revolution would know that the years that followed hardly constitute a model for democracy. Revolutions generally tend to engender strong state control, and the Iranian one, with its utopian promises and emphasis on collectivism, was no exception. After covering its chaotic aftermath, Gheissari and Nasr move on to provide a clear overview of the struggle for and eventual consolidation of power by the builders of the Islamic Republic. State-building took on an even more radical form as it moved toward complete political domination. With regulations on clothing, restrictions on women’s and minority rights, and controls placed on the news and media, ideological indoctrination spread to all facets of life.

The next two chapters carefully trace social and political developments during the last two decades, bringing readers to the heart of the matter: the renewed interest Iranians now have in democracy. In ‘An Islamic Developmental State?’ the authors show how Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s presidency, with its emphasis on pragmatism, brought about this interest by failing to solve the old problem of state-building and appease those who intended to reopen dialogue between state and society. In the fifth chapter, ‘State and Limits to Democracy’, they cover Mohammad Khatami’s presidency which came about as a result of division between those working for democratization and those seeking to consolidate authoritarianism. They then highlight the relevance of this very important point: ‘The two trends pulled Iranian politics in different directions, setting in motion struggles for power that can help explain the ebbs and flows of Iranian politics since 1997.’

The epilogue plays an important part in that it recaps the trend toward the hard-line conservatism that we are now witnessing. Gheissari and Nasr explain this paradigm by closely examining the 2005 election, and they have an interesting explanation as to how Ahmadinejad was actually able to garner the support that brought him victory. More remarkable is their prediction of how reformists and pragmatic conservatives might work together in the interests of democracy. Most importantly, the authors see potential for democracy in the way that politics are now carried out. The voice of the people has started to matter once again, they say. They have been proven right by the surge of dissent that carries on today.

In the final analysis, Gheissari and Nasr’s book explains that democracy has existed in Iranian politics for about a century, and that its realization has been hindered by the focus on state-building. This is enlightening for anyone who believes that Iran has always
been ruled by despots, and makes a strong case for democracy. In order for democracy to thrive, we are told, it will have to become harmonized with state interests so that stability goes hand-in-hand with dialogue and openness. This is a very appealing idea, and still rings true today as the Leviathan staggers and limps along.

R.N. Khatami


FEW Iranian intellectuals stir as much controversy as Hamid Dabashi. Versatile, daring and provocative, he has attracted attention for his outspoken views on a number of issues, not least among them the criticism of American foreign policy inspired by his specialization in postcolonial theory. And when it comes to the politics of his homeland, he is just as fiery, maybe to a violent degree. In Iran: A People Interrupted he puts forward a unique perspective by attempting to blend history, political and cultural theory, comparative literary analysis, aesthetics and even autobiography. The result is a narrative that glides through the last two hundred years of Iran’s history, taking many detours for personal reflection and commentary but always returning to a fixed central point.

When it comes to Iran, however, Dabashi’s contention rests precisely on the view that there is no such centrality. He states in the first chapter that, ‘Iran can be identified only as a set of mobile, circumambulatory, projectile, and always impermanent propositions. Anytime anyone tries to capture, corner, or nail it, it loses its identity. It is like a butterfly. It can only be seen in motion, fluttering its inconsistencies around – just before it has been caught, trapped, and pinned in a box.’ He seeks to break down borders to show that Iran is multifaceted and shaped by the interplay between ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces, one pulling it aunder and the other attracting it toward an imaginary centre. Above all, he insists on dismantling the dichotomy of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, which he sees as a ‘false and falsifying paradox.’

To understand the point Dabashi tries to make, it is helpful to recognize him as an adherent of the late great Edward Said, whom he quotes frequently throughout the text. Dabashi argues that just as Orientalism created an ‘Orient’ to define itself and gain ascendancy, so too did Iranian studies conflate various cultures to form ‘Iran’. He goes further to try and refute the validity of the tradition/modernity binary by both claiming that tradition carries with it the delusions of cultural authenticity and viewing modernity in a negative light, calling it an indignity because it comes in colonial terms. Enlightenment modernity, he says, came to Iran through the gun barrel of European colonialism, thus negating the notions of agency and autonomy that were supposed to accompany it.

Dabashi returns to this point regularly throughout the book, covering much historical ground along the way. As he goes from the Constitutional Revolution to the Pahlavis, from the Islamic Revolution to the end of Islamic ideology, he provides a nuanced understanding of history informed by a diversity of sources such as literature, poetry and travelogue in addition to the standard analysis of political theories and events. In ‘The Dawn of Colonial Modernity’, for instance, he follows the journey of a young student named Mirza Saleh, who in the early 1800s travelled to England, studied the humanities and brought back a wealth of knowledge which helped shape the foundation for freedom, democracy and rule of law in Iran. The writing in this chapter, oscillating between Mirza’s story and commentary on its significance, is somewhat informal and refreshing, characteristic of much of the author’s work. In terms of precision and persuasiveness, however, it leaves itself open to some criticism.

Much of the book is concerned with providing a picture of an organic, cosmopolitan political culture rooted in an understanding shaped by literature and poetry. Thus, he moves from one historical period to another, Dabashi seeks to unearth or at least expose some literary figures behind this culture. Among the names mentioned are Taher Zadeh Saber, Dehkhoda, Lahuti, Yazdi, Hedayat, Farrokhzad, Sephri and Shamlu. But while it is enlightening to learn more about these important characters in the drama of Iranian history, it is at the same time troubling how Dabashi presents them. His praise for another poet, Aref Qazvini, best illustrates this problematic aspect: ‘When the malevolent Sheykh Fazl Allah Nuri was hanged by the revolutionaries, Aref was there to commemorate the event with an emancipatory ode. When Muhammad Ali Shah’s military coup failed to overturn the achievement of the Constitutionalists, Aref was there to sing his people’s song of freedom’, and so on. What may be wrong with this kind of exaltation?

The potentially disquieting aspect of Dabashi’s suggestion is that it rests on a radical interpretation of modernity. Again, he does not readily accept modernity as it was brought to Iran, but insists on the label of colonial modernity, which is European in its disposi-
tion and therefore detrimental to the rest of the world because it denies that majority true agency or self-direction. He states that this kind of modernity has engendered its opposite, namely anticolonial modernity, which is not borrowed but organic – this is what he has in mind when he cites the many writers and poets that are supposed to define a cosmopolitan Iranian culture. ‘My proposal here,’ he says toward the end, ‘is that fighting back (picking up a gun and shooting back like José Martí and Che Guevara, or picking up a pen and writing back like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said) against European (and later American) colonialists was conducive to the effective articulation of a particular mode of modernity, an anticolonial modernity, which has always been contingent on the historical attendance of the colonized upon the modernity of history.’ But in following this kind of violent path, he undermines the legitimacy of organic cosmopolitanism, which may be seen as injurious to Iran’s interests. The hanging of Sheykh Nuri was one of the greatest impediments to democracy in Iran, and it had far-reaching consequences – a small boy in the town of Khomein who was six years old at the time would never forget this act, which he came to see as the martyrdom of his mentor. Thus glorifying a poet for glorifying such an act of violence could be seen as perpetuating a brand of aggression that is in many ways holding Iran back. This, in any case, is how one might see it if one is not convinced by any form of radicalism.

A related problem is the unfortunate way in which Dabashi derides fellow Iranian intellectuals with the aim of promoting his own interpretations. He presents other scholars as ‘inorganic’ and ‘limited in imagination’, often engaging in ad hominem attacks and, in many cases, misrepresenting their views. Dabashi is a brilliant writer, but his polemical tendencies do sometimes cast a shadow over his gleaming wit. He is never boring, but for those who disagree with his views, he can be difficult to swallow.

Dialogue, understanding and cooperation are crucial if democracy is to flourish in Iran. Hamid Dabashi does not always seem very enthusiastic about promoting those ideas, as his book illustrates. However, he certainly adds to the debate by bringing in a unique reading of Iranian history and warning against the perils of foreign intervention. Despite his inclination toward radicalism and his overindulgence in polemic, he is an informative and unconventional thinker who can find appreciation in careful, tolerant readers.

R.N. Khatami

IRAN: Between Tradition and Modernity

WHEN it comes to the long list of books on Iran, especially those written in the last ten or so years, ‘required reading’ is a label that applies only to a very small number of them. Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity stands out as one of those few books. With a list of distinguished contributors addressing imperative topics, it is a work continually in dialogue with itself, producing lucid insights and valuable breakthroughs. The essays in this collection are diverse, inventive and meticulously compiled to allow for a deep understanding of the ideas it addresses.

Modernity has, of course, always been a troublesome topic for Iranians, given the way it has been interpreted, appropriated and developed. In its eloquent introduction, Ramin Jahanbegloo speaks of the new ways in which the concept of modernity is being reassessed through dialogical exchange. The gain that stems from this discussion is substantial: ‘In helping to maintain this dialogical exchange with modernity from within the Iranian identity, Iranians could finally free themselves once and forever from the intellectual blackmail of “being for or against the West” or “having to choose between tradition and modernity”’. As in much of his other work, Jahanbegloo advocates ideas of tolerance and pluralism and, in that spirit, sets the stage for a luminous, multifaceted analysis of what has proven to be a fateful encounter for Iran.

The essays are separated into four parts, the first allowing for a theorization and contextualization of modernity, and the other three dealing with particular themes and concepts associated with it. ‘Thinking Modernity’, with essays by Jamshid Behnam, Mazyar Lotfalian and Nader Hashemi, provides a background showing how modernity was received and has since been by turns adapted, rejected and reappraised. While all three provide interesting observations, Hashemi’s essay perhaps stands out the most because it points to the potential for a kind of reconciliation helpful in the current Iranian context. In ‘The Relevance of John Locke to Social Change in the Muslim World: A Comparison with Iran’, he seeks to show, by examining the religious roots of modern liberalism, that the Muslim world (particularly Iran) can learn from the fact that the modernization of the West did not begin with democracy and human rights; rather, these concepts came about as a result of struggle and self-critique – tasks that the reform movement in Iran continues to be engaged with.
The theme of part two, ‘Theology and Modernity’, is self-explanatory. What is surprising is the scope and depth of the three essays that make it up. Monica M. Ringer’s essay looks at education reforms and the establishment of secular schools like the famous Dar al Fonun, stressing that it is impossible to come up with an ‘ulama response’ to this programme and therefore the labels frequently thrown at these religious scholars are misrepresentations and oversimplifications. She advises that we ‘recognize the complexities of the ulama in the process of modernization and the debate on modernity’, and in so doing provides a path away from popular misconceptions and generalities. Farzin Vahdat’s ‘Mehdi haeri Yazi and the Discourse of Modernity’ is a sophisticated piece that is in many ways a continuation of this way of thinking. Vahdat looks at the ways in which the ideas of an important Shia cleric can potentially provide a strong foundation for democracy in Iran, showing a democratic strain in his interpretation of Islam. Through a deep philosophical analysis, he traces the principle of representation in Haeri’s thought, a potential antidote to the notion of velayat-e faqih (the Guardianship of the Jurist) which is the basis for the repressive theocracy in place today. Sohrab Behdad’s ‘Utopia of Assassins: Navvab Safavi and the Fada’ian-e Eslam in Prerevolutionary Iran’ provides a fascinating glimpse at another extreme: the chilling vision of a vicious society that purports to be utopian while speaking the language of extremism and terrorism. Ringer, Vahdat and Behdad’s essays combine to shed light on the complexities of the ulama in the process of modernization and struggle for civil liberties. Roksana Bahramitash and Susan Siavoshi repudiate stereotypes which cast Iranian women as somehow weak or helpless, illustrating that they have made great strides within society, particularly in the political realm. And Majid Tehranian foresees a positive result from such steps: ‘As the nation achieves greater independence and self-confidence, the wounds of impotence will be gradually healed while a political culture of tolerance and compromise emerges.’ Such a hopeful end is not merely wishful thinking: it has been fought for, and will continue to be fought for as long as the exchange of ideas and the hunger for a greater understanding persist in inspiring it.

Ramin Jahanbegloo states that, ‘If this book has one principal aim, it is to diminish the dim spots surrounding the history of the encounter of Iran with modernity and its political, social, and cultural consequences.’ Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity goes beyond this task by illuminating many corners of the web of complexity enveloping Iran, leading to new paths for dialogue and informing us as to how these constructive developments can be put toward constructive ends. It is a text that deserves to be looked at time and again, invaluable for anyone who wants to go beyond a basic understanding of Iran.


‘Today, June 29, 2005, is the nineteenth day of my second hunger strike.’ Akbar Ganji wrote these words in solitary confinement, within the dreary walls of Evin prison, a monument of iniquity familiar to many Iranian dissidents and human rights activists. Those words, and the account that followed, were smuggled
out and distributed as a ‘Letter to the Free People of the World’, attracting worldwide attention and helping to secure his eventual release a year later. The letter now serves as a prologue to The Road to Democracy in Iran, his first book in English.

Ganji’s poignant account reflects his unwavering belief in the values of freedom, democracy and justice. Having worked for years as a journalist and an intellectual dissident, publishing articles and books in which he denounced leading members of the clergy as well as conservative candidates, he has exposed much of the corruption plaguing Iranian politics. Disenchanted with the regime after his initial career as an officer in the Revolutionary Guards, he went on to become one of the most prominent voices in the reform movement, helping to shape the language of anti-authoritarian dissidence and discontent. Because of his views he was first charged for planning to overthrow the government and eventually imprisoned for ‘spreading propaganda against the Islamic system.’

Though it reads almost like a pamphlet or a manifesto, The Road to Democracy in Iran is in fact a philosophical meditation on the problem of human rights violations. Even as he focuses primarily on Iran, Ganji widens his lens to discuss universality and essentialism. He affirms that he is not an essentialist, and identifies the common experience of pain as the foundation for human rights. One would think that this places him in the same camp as American philosophers like Richard Rorty and Michael Walzer, but he explicitly states that he does not ‘agree with some postmodernists and communitarians who grant such overwhelming power to historical, geographical and cultural context that they render unity impossible. We are not relativists.’ Instead, he opts for a kind of negative utilitarianism as proposed by Karl Popper, which aims at the greatest reduction of pain and suffering for the greatest number of people, and in that regard emphasizes universality.

In discussing Iran, Ganji maintains that the pressing problem is culture. Superstition, dogmatism and conformism are identified as the roots of injustice; religion is said to be connected to these, but it is neither singled out as their sole cause nor rejected altogether. Ganji has an interesting way of straddling many divisions. This is reflected in his current experience as an exile, occupying a rootless liminal space from which he tries to harmonize the greatest contributions of western thought with the richness and depth of Iran’s own culture. His aim, therefore, is not to chastise Iranians for being Iranian; rather, he wants them to be educated about how certain cultural norms bring about inequality and suffering, and how to reform themselves intellectually by considering other possibilities.

With this view in mind, Ganji turns to what is perhaps the most concrete and powerful part of his book. His third chapter is devoted to analyzing equality and women’s rights. Condemning gender apartheid, which those in power in Iran have justified on the basis of divine origin, he goes on to list a number of spheres in which women suffer from a lack of rights. These include health and the value of life, sanctity of the body, dress, mobility and free assembly, the right of citizenship and the right to transfer it to children, marriage and family, birth control, and education. As throughout the rest of the book, Ganji’s arguments are brief and cogent. His explanation of how one can object to laws that authorize such inequality without rejecting religion altogether is well worth considering.

The book ends with a commentary on Islam and the West, a sensitive topic which Ganji acknowledges as anything but simple: ‘My intention is merely to draw out a broad map in this ongoing debate, which I hope will orient those interested in the possibility of easing tensions between Islam and the West. I offer here suggestions for how to begin a discussion. They will not end it.’ He does, however, make some rather sweeping claims which oversimplify subjects carefully scrutinized and problematized by others. His characterization of the West as dominant – culturally, materially and ideologically – and his portrayal of Islam as ‘currently in a defensive mode’, are somewhat dubious and seem to go against some of the statements he makes elsewhere. He admits that many reasons for his claims are ‘too complex to detail here’, but this leads one to wonder whether he should have stated them in such terms to begin with. Ultimately, the final chapter is the most controversial, though it ends on a positive note of peace and tolerance.

While Akbar Ganji may be one of the best known Iranian dissidents around the world, he is certainly not unique. Other intellectuals and activists have worked hard and made tremendous sacrifices trying to create a better, more democratic Iranian society and to open up dialogue among divergent worldviews. Ganji’s main strength lies in his ability to persuade, whether through courageous acts or pithy phrases: ‘Today my broken face is the true face of the system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. My ravaged body exposes the regime’s oppressiveness.’ Though not formally a philosopher, Ganji is well-read, and he engages with philosophical questions confidently. His book provides only a basic roadmap to democracy, but it is certainly...
a valuable contribution to the dialogue on human rights and a source of hope for anyone pessimistic about its prospects.

R.N. Khatami


ISLAM and its relationship with democracy has been a keenly discussed and passionately debated issue, both in popular as well as academic discourses. The main theme of these debates has been the incompatibility/compatibility of Islam with democracy and secularism. With a focus on the Middle East, the ‘Islamic heartland’, these debates hardly take India into account, where Muslims are the largest minority population in the world. After Indonesia and Pakistan, India has the largest Muslim population in the world. As per the 2001 census, there are 138 million Muslims in India, and the projected figure for the year 2011 is 170 million.

Muslims are a peculiar minority in India. They differ from their religious counterparts in other countries in many ways but the most important marker is that ‘they…utilize the most important facet of being Indian: their franchise. Muslims vote in larger numbers than their other religious counterparts.’ That the societies of the ‘Islamic heartland’ have largely been undemocratic and non-secular in comparison to India made author Irfan Ahmad raise a very pertinent question: ‘Can conclusions drawn from studies of “heartland” hold up in a secular democracy like India, where Muslims have had a different, complex trajectory?’ (p. 10)

Islamism and Democracy in India is a remarkable book that engages in a constant dialogue between anthropology and history. Ahmad’s work unravels complex interactions and associations between postcolonial Indian democracy and Islamism with the help of an in-depth, longitudinal, ethnographic study of the shifting ideological stances of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), one the oldest and most prominent Islamist organizations, and its breakaway faction, Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Through this ‘thick description’, Ahmad skillfully documents the transformation (moderation) of the Jamaat from being a vanguard of Islamism to a zealous adherent of secularism and democracy and, also, the radicalization of SIMI in the wake of Hindutva movement. The study argues that Muslims hold on to the values of pluralism and democracy as long as a state is amenable to their traditional way of life and sociopolitical aspirations. On the contrary, when state changes its line as per the wishes of the majority community and practices politics of exclusion, Muslim minorities turn radical.

The Jamaat was founded on 31 August 1941 in Lahore by Abul Ala Maududi as a frontline Islamic organization. The main goal of this ‘pious party’ was hukumat-e-ilahiya, an Islamic state. For Maududi, British India was dar al-harb and secularism and democracy were ultimate symbols of jahiliyat (an anti-Islamic polity) and taghuti nizam (idolatrous system). The belief of perennial battle between Islam and jahiliyar led the Jamaat’s founder to boycott all the institutions affiliated to a democratic system including the parliamentary assembly, judiciary, bureaucracy, army and even secular educational institutions. Even after partition/independence, the Jamaat sustained this opposition.

Such was the nature of opposition that the Jamaat’s amir, Abdullah Islahi Nadwi, favoured a Hindu state to a secular democracy. The Jamaat boycotted the first two elections. However, the overwhelming participation of Muslims in electoral democracy made several dents in lived ideology of the Jamaat. In 1961, the Jamaat set up a committee to examine the possibility of creating an Islamic state in India through the ballot. During the 1962 general election, the main decision-making body of the organization, the majlis-e-shura, maintained a ban on the members to participate in the elections but encouraged the Muslim public to vote in favour of Muslim candidates.

It was 1967 when the Jamaat for the first time allowed its members to vote for a Muslim candidate. In 1977, the ban on members voting was temporarily lifted to contribute to the downfall of Indira Gandhi, who had banned the Jamaat during the Emergency. The following year, the prohibition against voting members of the organization was restored, however, and only in 1984 was it lifted. These changes brought along differences within the party. Many of its important leaders left the party. SIMI also opposed these transformations in the parent organization. In 1982, the Jamaat established the Students Islamic Organization (SIO), its new student wing, after breaking ties with SIMI. With the transformation of the national politi-
Political events have a close bearing on academic trends. The study of Islam and Islamist movements acquired an extraordinary status in wake of the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. This global event had enormous geopolitical implications, including for India. In the introductory chapters of the book, Ahmad very lucidly tells how he had to face extreme suspicion in wake of the global ‘War on Terror’ among members of his ‘own community’. Ahmad situates his work in opposition to scholarship that posits incompatibility of democracy and Islamism and that describes moderation of Islamism as ‘merely tactical, not real.’

For Ahmad, ‘It is not the seamless culture or sacred text of Islam that fosters radicalism; on the contrary, it is the dynamics of politics that sets the discourse of jihad in motion’ (p. 25). To accomplish this task, Ahmad carried out a multi-sited fieldwork in North Indian towns of Aligarh, Azamgarh, Delhi, Patna and Rampur. Ahmad interviewed a range of people in different ethnographic locations, including school teachers and parents of students studying in the Jammat run schools, SIO and SIMI members in madrasas and universities, Jamaat members and community leaders.

In chapter three, with the help of an ethnography of the Green School, a Jamaat-run school in the city of Aligarh, Ahmad shows us how the Jammat’s educational ideology underwent an immense change in the wake of changing demands of the Muslim public. Ahmad expertly captures the ongoing conflicts among its teachers and management committee about adherence to the foundational vision and ideological management of the school. Maududi’s aim was to transform every individual into a mujahid in the path of Allah. But instead of transforming society, the school has been transformed by society.

The following chapter titled ‘Mobilizing the Young’ similarly examines the various strategies employed by SIO activists on the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) campus. Once declared a ‘slaughterhouse’, the AMU has now turned into an arena where SIO and SIMI compete for gaining support for Maududi’s ideology, albeit in diverse manners. The SIO pursued the path of persuasion, exemplified in its adherence to university rules as well as public law, rather than confrontation, to stop what is regarded as immoral practices, such as dance and cyber pornography. Also, they presented Islam and the Prophet Muhammad as symbols of love and peace and invoked secularism to ground its claims and formulate its response to the Babri mosque demolition.

The Jamiatul Falah in Azamgarh was founded in the year 1962 by the Jamaat in order to propagate its ideology among young members of Muslim community. During his fieldwork on the Falah campus, Ahmad highlights how that the Islamist organizations react differently to conditions created by Hindutva forces. SIMI reacted to it radically, whereas SIO tackled the situation rather moderately. Ahmad argues that the conflict between SIO and SIMI signifies an ongoing democratization underway in the Islamist organizations. Unlike the first and second generation Islamists, these activists, predominantly urban and possessing a specific type of cultural capital and disposition, assert their rights rather than duties.

Ahmad examines the processes that led to SIMI’s radicalization as articulated in its calls for jihad and Caliphate. Ahmad shows that radicalization of the SIMI cadre materialized in response to Hindutva. He states that to understand the process of radicalization of SIMI we need not go beyond the simplistic analyses of Islamic belief systems but to critically engage with events like Babri Masjid demolition and the consequential erosion of Indian secularism. With the help of analysis of the 1992 AMU’s student’s union elections which won by SIMI with a huge margin in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Ahmad raises several questions regarding the politics of jihad and how SIMI justified its stance theologically.

In the concluding chapters, Ahmad traces the progression of the Jamaat in the postcolonial environment and traces important factors which contributed to its moderation. Ahmad shows how a thoroughly anti-secular movement became an ardent supporter of democracy and secularism in a postcolonial democracy. The Muslim electorate’s overwhelming participation in the elections, internal democracy within the organization, and majoritarian tendencies of the state, according to Ahmad, shaped these transformations. However, the absence of the Jamaat from electoral democracy lessens the importance of the argument. Moreover, there is also need to critically examine the role of the Indian state’s policy of banning the Jamaat periodically and its impact on these transformations. This is an indispensable book – a must read for social scientists engaged in studies of Islamism, Indian Muslims and sociopolitical movements in South Asia.

Chakraverti Mahajan